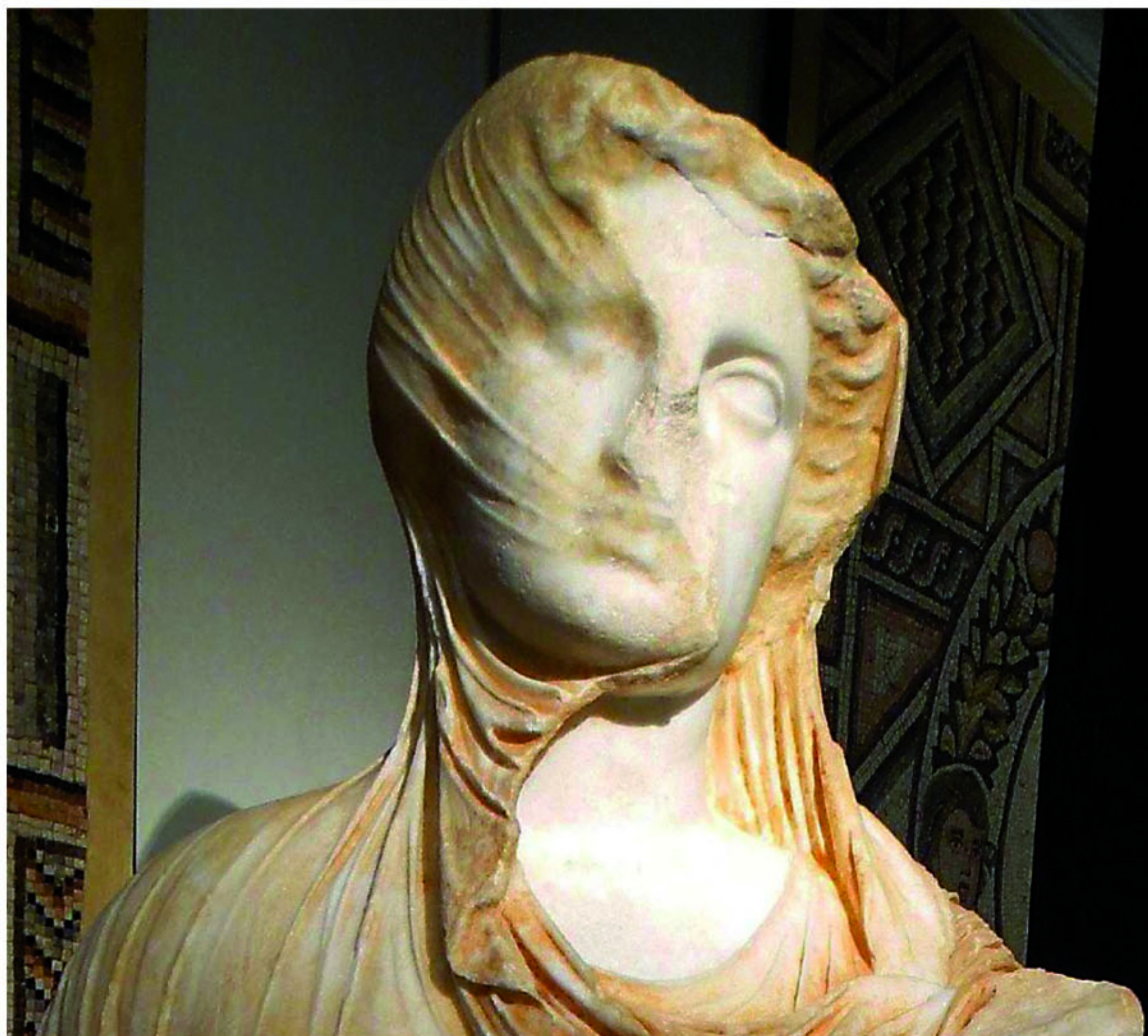


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# Road Networks in Cyrenaica during the Greek and Roman Periods: Cyrene in Context

Mohamed Omar M. Abdrbba

*This article investigates the ancient Greek and Roman roads in Cyrenaica, both major and minor, with a particular focus on the roads leading to Cyrene. Some of the roads were recorded, in terms of their location and extension, in 2015 and 2017 during the doctoral project "Cyrene Archaeological Surveys" (CAS) that the Author conducted in the suburban zone of the ancient city of Cyrene. This article reviews the road courses leading to settlements located in the hinterlands, and links these routes with Cyrene's roads to create an overall view of the road network of the entire area.*

Two crucial Roman road itineraries which cover the whole area of North Africa have survived<sup>1</sup>. The first is the Antonine Itinerary, most likely dated to the age of Caracalla, who ruled from AD 211 to 217. This itinerary consists of a list of roads and road-stations, and shows the distance between different places<sup>2</sup>. The second is the so-called Peutinger Map, which was first discovered and published by the German scholar Konrad Peutinger (1465-1547)<sup>3</sup>. This document, now housed in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, is a schematic map of the Roman Empire which depicts towns, seas, rivers, forests, mountain ranges and about 115.000 km of roads<sup>4</sup>, although with significant geographic/spatial distortion. Distances between many places along the roads were also recorded.

The Romans placed milestone columns on the side of roads, in theory at each Roman mile (1.482 m)<sup>5</sup>. These bore inscriptions providing information about the distance to the next important city as well as specific points along the roads. They also

served to record and promote the name of the emperor who created or renewed the road. Milestones were normally made from local stones, measuring approximately 2.5 m in height and 0.65 m in diameter. They possessed cubical bases intended to be sunk deep into the ground to give the columns greater stability<sup>6</sup>.

## GREEK AND ROMAN ROADS IN CYRENAICA

Archaeological traces of many of the Greek and Roman roads in Cyrenaica have been recorded and described by a number of travellers and scholars. They have left vital information about the roads that they encountered on their travels around the region<sup>7</sup>.

The majority of the main roads in Cyrenaica were originally created during the Greek period, and were primarily intended to link the cities between Berenice (Benghazi) and Darnis (Derna) (Fig. 1). The Romans generally reused these roads but likely

<sup>1</sup> SALAMA 1951, pp. 15-16; LARONDE 1987, p. 261; CHEVALLIER 1989.

<sup>2</sup> BAGSHAWE 1979, p. 18; CHEVALLIER 1989, pp. 28-37.

<sup>3</sup> BAGSHAWE 1979, p. 18; ALBU 2014.

<sup>4</sup> PRITCHETT 1980, p. 197; ALBU 2014, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> For Cyrenaica see GOODCHILD 1950, and 1953.

<sup>6</sup> GOODCHILD 1968a, p. 156; KOLB 2011.

<sup>7</sup> BEECHY, BEECHY 1828, pp. 422, 447, 489-490; WELD-BLUNDELL 1896, p. 135; GREGORY 1916, p. 322; GOODCHILD 1968a; MATTINGLY 2000.



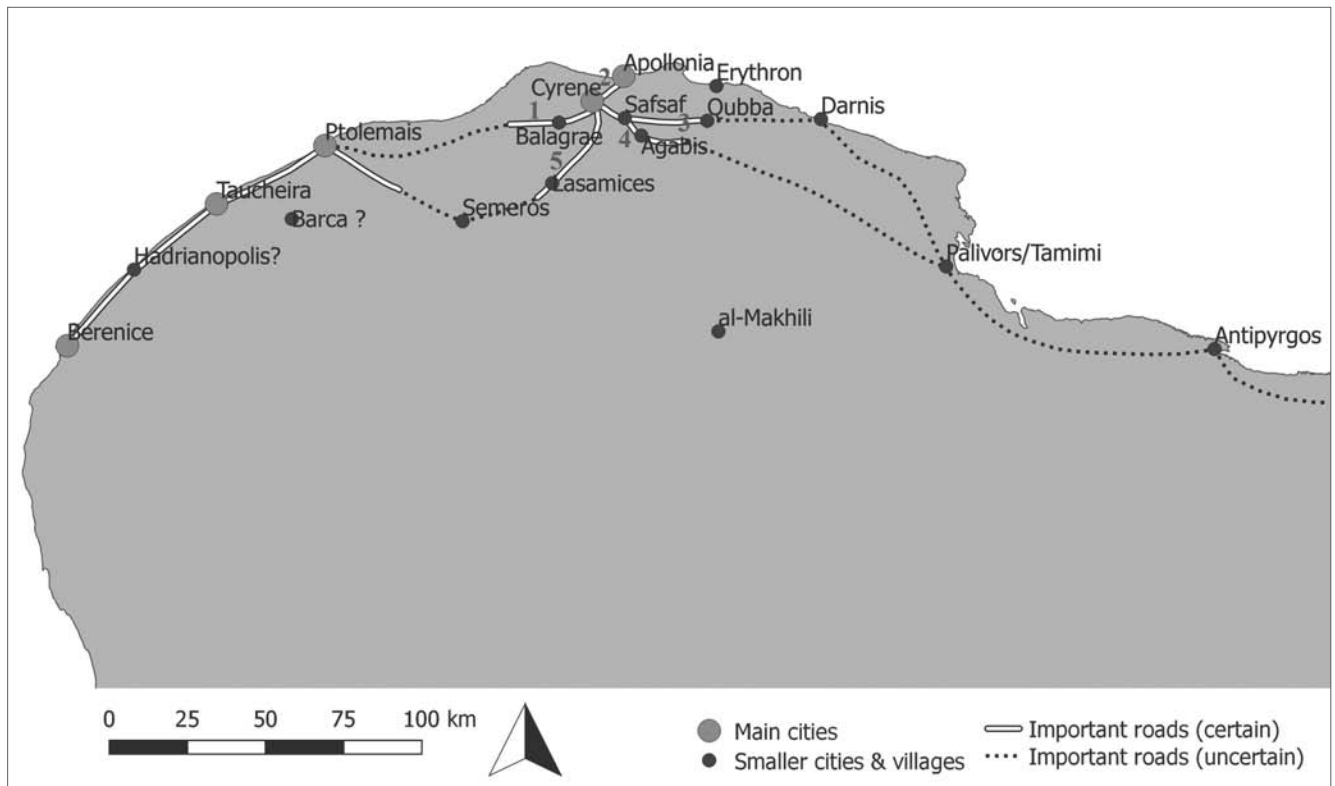


FIG. 1 - A map of the major Greek and Roman roads in Cyrenaica.

added several other roads and minor routes to link the major roads and to approach a number of new sites. Most of these roads outside of the cities were not paved, although some can be identified by wheel ruts where they crossed over areas of exposed bed-rock.

The most important road in Cyrenaica in the Greek period can still be traced between Berenice and Cyrene (Shahat), which linked the five main cities of the region (*Fig. 1, no. 1*). After Ptolemais (Tulmaytha), this coastal road curved inland because of the interruption of the edge of the Jabal Akhdar<sup>8</sup>; it then ran eastward to Cyrene, after passing through a number of sites such as Massah and Balagrae (al-Bayda)<sup>9</sup>.

Approximately 4 km west of Ptolemais there is a road that ran from Sidi Abdallah to the area known as Sidi Dachil. On the coast, another route also extended from Ptolemais to the first step of Wadi Khambish. From there, this road bent eastward and crossed a flat area to Sidi Nuah. By crossing Wadi

el-Laulab, it led to Maaten el-Uqla at sea level<sup>10</sup>. At the site of Aptouchou Hieron (now al-Haniya), approximately 20 km northeast of Balagrae and 42 km to the west of Apollonia, a road can still be traced heading northeast, parallel to the coast, which then ran southeast leaving Wadi el-Beida to the east. This road rises slowly to reach 335 m east of the Sidi el-Agheila marabout (a Muslim religious leader and teacher in West Africa), and reaches the remains of an ancient village located 2 km west of al-Bayda<sup>11</sup>.

Another major road ran northward to Apollonia, since communications were vital, especially between Cyrene and its port (*Fig. 1, no. 2*). This road was approximately 20 km long and built originally in the Greek period, however, it was greatly damaged, particularly as a result of the impact of heavy rains and torrents in the winter<sup>12</sup>. A number of milestones were found along this road, some bearing inscriptions that record a first rebuilding of the road in the Roman period during the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54)<sup>13</sup>. It would later be reconstructed again under

<sup>8</sup> MATTINGLY 2000, p. 559.

<sup>9</sup> GOODCHILD 1950, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> LARONDE 1987, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 269.

<sup>12</sup> GOODCHILD 1968a, p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> GOODCHILD 1950, p. 89.

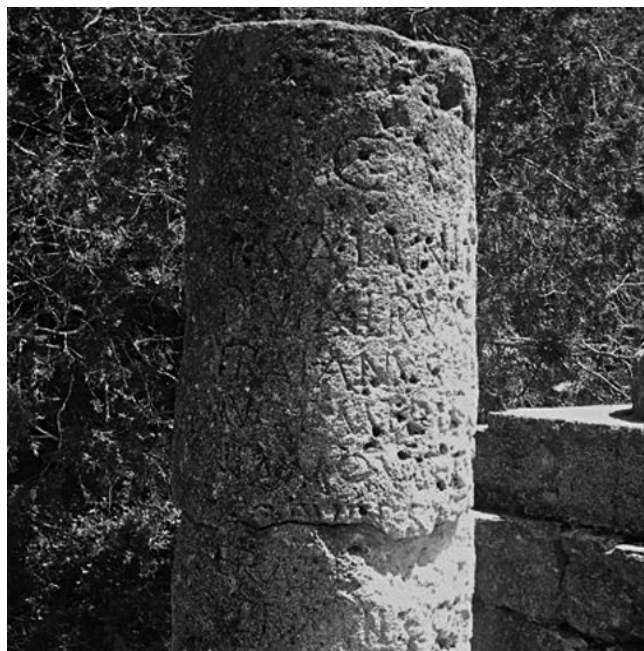


FIG. 2 - A milestone recording repairs to the Apollonian road during Hadrian's reign, not in situ, 2007.

Trajan, by soldiers of a military cohort in AD 100<sup>14</sup>. An inscription engraved on a milestone records that the road was repaired again in AD 118 during Hadrian's reign (Fig. 2), after this important road was greatly damaged in the Jewish revolt of AD 115<sup>15</sup>.

#### GREEK AND ROMAN ROADS IN THE URBAN PERIPHERY OF CYRENE

Five major roads have been recorded leading towards Cyrene (Fig. 1, nos 1-5). These roads most likely had some minor branches and were connected to the region's main roads, making Cyrene an important part of the road network. In addition to the two previously-mentioned roads running from Cyrene to Balagrae and Apollonia, there were three major roads (Fig. 1, nos. 3-5), which extended from Cyrene to the south, southwest and southeast.

The third road appears in the Antonine Itinerary (Fig. 1, no. 3). It ran eastwards, passing Limnias (Lamludah) and Derna, and possibly extending as a minor route to Paliouros (at-Tamimi, circa 120 km

southeast Cyrene) in the area known as the Gulf of Bumba<sup>16</sup>. This road is thought to have linked to a minor route extending southeast to Antipyrgos (Tobruk) and then further to the south, as a desert route serving the oases of Jaghbub and Melfa and then Siwa (the famous site of the Oracle of Ammon). However, any traces of this possible road have disappeared, and no milestones have yet been found along its long course. The fourth road ran through Safsaf to Agabis, and is recorded on the Peutinger Map (Fig. 1, no. 4). This road also most likely extended east of Paliouros on the coast to Antipyrgos, and then to Alexandria after passing Paraetonium (Marsa Matruh). The fifth road ran south from Cyrene, and possibly southwest to Ptolemais through Semeros (Marawah) and Lasamices (Suluntah) (Fig. 1, no. 5)<sup>17</sup>.

The roads around Cyrene also extended across the plateau supporting a network of villages and farms and linking a number of the surrounding cities, rural settlements and ports (Fig. 3)<sup>18</sup>. Many ancient structures, such as the remains of terraced cultivation, irrigation channels, wells and aqueducts, are mentioned along these roads<sup>19</sup>, a substantial proportion of which can be dated to the Roman period. Traces of these roads are still visible in some places in the countryside, especially where these roads were cut into the natural bedrock, and deep cart-wheel marks in several places demonstrate that these roads were subject to heavy use.

One example of the roads recorded in 2015 and 2017 during my doctoral project "Cyrene Archaeological Surveys" (CAS) is located to the east of Cyrene, in the area between Wadi Ain Hofra and Wadi Bu Miliou. The summary sketch of the road is about 250 m in length and 2.80 m in width (Fig. 4). This road extends from south to north and is interrupted on its north side by modern roads and houses, before disappearing under new farms on both the north and south sides. Physical traces of this road show visible wheel ruts on the ground; however, the many stones scattered on both sides of the road and sunk into the ground suggest that sections were probably paved. Some remains of its course can also be traced on the lower plateau, suggesting that the road led to the lower areas of the city and possibly to the coast.

<sup>14</sup> SEG IX, 251.

<sup>15</sup> GOODCHILD 1950, p. 86; SMALLWOOD 2001, p. 410; WALKER 2002, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> GOODCHILD 1968a, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> GOODCHILD 1950, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> JONES *et al.* 1998, p. 286.

<sup>19</sup> BEECHY, BEECHY 1828, p. 422; GREGORY 1916, p. 322.

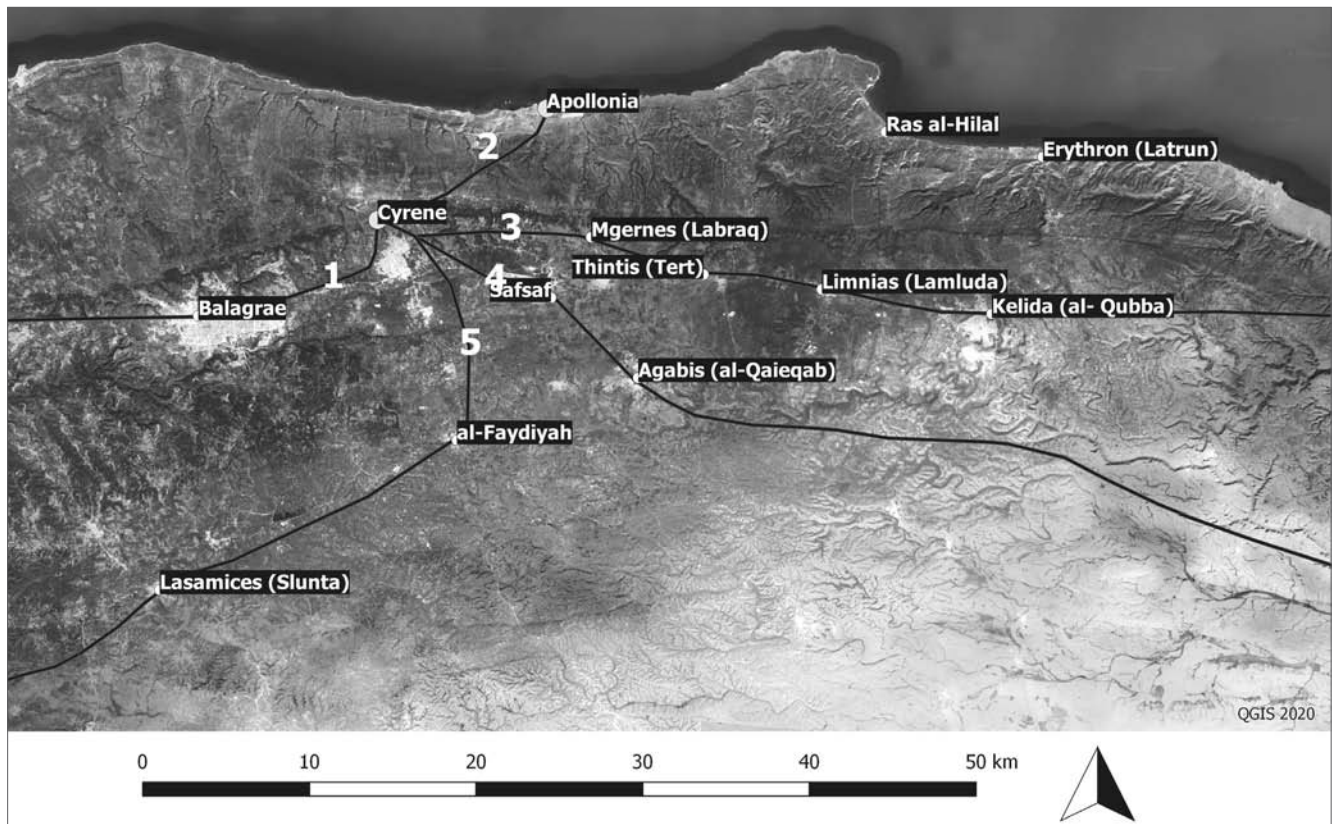


FIG. 3 - Map of the road network in the outskirts of Cyrene.

Another road is located southeast of the Cyrene urban core within the area of the Katiba. This road is 4 m in width, runs north to south, and possesses well-preserved deep cuts made by carts (*Fig. 5*). The wheel ruts are 0.28 m in width and 0.15 m in depth, and the distance between them is 1.50 m. The extant part of this road today is only about 130 m long, because of the intense overbuilding both to the north and south. The course of this road is still visible due to the fact that in this extant section it crosses shallow bedrock. This road possibly dates to the Roman period, because Cyrene grew towards the southeast during that time and most of the archaeological sites discovered in this area in fact date to the imperial age<sup>20</sup>. It can therefore be assumed that this road originated in Roman times, and was created to link this area with other sites along the southeast side of the city.

To the southwest of Cyrene lies another road which probably dates to the late sixth century BC<sup>21</sup>. This road possibly marks the line of the major road from Cyrene to Balagrae, and passes through



FIG. 4 - A general view of the road located east of Cyrene, looking south.

Cyrene's Southern Necropolis. Today, the remaining part of this road is approximately 1.5 km long and up to 4 m wide (*Fig. 6*). As with most of Cyrene's roads, many rock-cut tombs, sarcophagi, and quarries, in which subterranean tombs have been dug, appear on both sides of this road.

<sup>20</sup> CASSELLS 1955, p. 3; THORN 2005, p. 23. See also the documentation held at the Archive of the Archaeological Mission of the Università di Chieti in

Libya. For a general account on this Archive see MENOZZI *et al.* 2018.

<sup>21</sup> WELD-BLUNDELL 1896, p. 135; CHERSTICH 2008, p. 78.





FIG. 5 - A view of the road within the Katiba area, southeast of Cyrene.



FIG. 6 - A view of the Southern Necropolis road, Cyrene.

There are further remains of a road west of Cyrene near Wadi Bunabeh. The traces of this road in this section are greatly damaged, and the wheel ruts cannot be traced properly or accurately (Fig. 7); however, its direction suggests that it most likely led to the western part of the Northern Necropolis (Fig. 8). It was probably also used to transfer stones cut from quarries located west of the city, especially from the eastern side of Wadi Bunabeh.

Several routes were also recorded in the area known as Ghot Sidi Omran. This occupies a large flat area on the lower plateau near al-Mansura village circa 2 km northeast of Cyrene, which is thought to have been an important agricultural settlement. The routes extended in a number of different directions, linking the site with Cyrene and its port Apollonia<sup>22</sup>. Due to its strategic location between Cyrene and Apollonia, as well as the richness of its fertile red soil, this site was probably a waystation to collect and store goods and agricultural crops before they were exported via Cyrene's port.

#### FINAL REMARKS

Ancient Greek and Roman roads were primarily constructed to connect the principal cities in every province, as well as the surrounding forts and defen-



FIG. 7 - A member of the survey team tracking the road near Wadi Bunabeh, Cyrene, looking southeast.

sive castles<sup>23</sup>. These roads served a variety of military, civilian and commercial purposes, such as efficiently transferring news and reports, in addition to the delivery of administrative and military orders.

The Greeks built a network of roads in Cyrenaica to link the main cities along the region's coast and to connect them with other settlements located in the hinterlands and countryside. The Romans constructed various new roads and developed and expanded most of the Greek-built roads. The inscrip-

<sup>22</sup> EL-MAYER 2016, pp. 373-376.

<sup>23</sup> SALAMA 1951, pp. 38-39; GOODCHILD 1968a, p. 155.

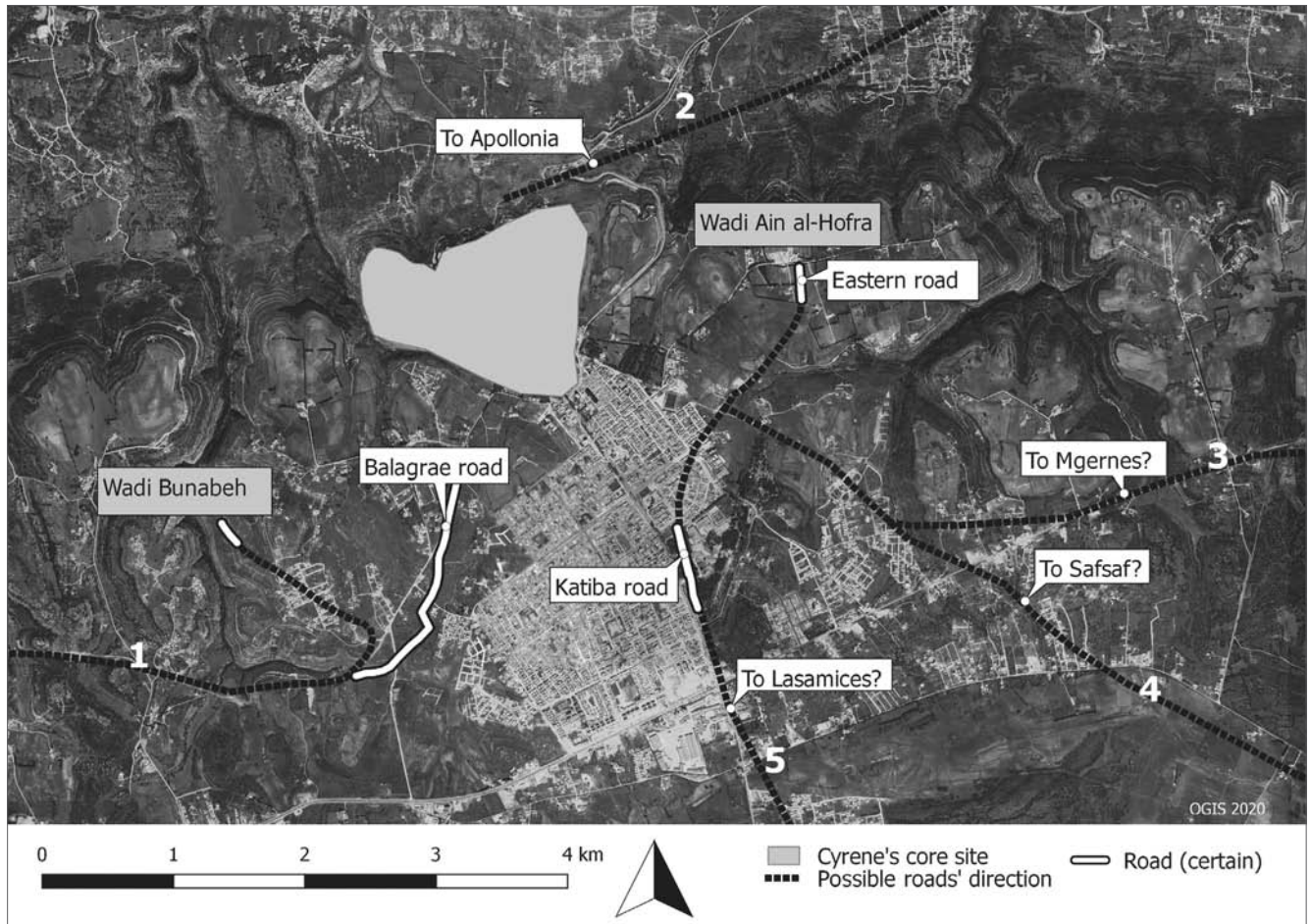


FIG. 8 - The possible courses of the ancient roads around Cyrene.

tions on the milestones found between Cyrene and Apollonia prove that the reconstruction of this road occurred during the Roman period<sup>24</sup>. This would have occurred after the road was destroyed for the first time by heavy rains, and the second time following the Jewish revolt in AD 115.

Since many of these roads and their milestones in Cyrenaica are located in the countryside around the cities, some of them have been completely destroyed or greatly damaged. Moreover, a number of other routes remain at high risk of destruction due to land reclamation and the development of new cities. My survey project (CAS) has enabled the mapping of some of these infrastructural features that were so

important to Cyrene's economy. Many sections of the ancient roads, particularly those which extended outside Cyrene, have been destroyed by new buildings and farms. These roads led to several other sites and have minor routes extending out of the city. Many of them were apparently never documented in the Department of Antiquities of Libya archives, since no images or coordinates related to them were found. This means that this road network was never followed up or conserved, and remains under high threat. It is therefore recommended that further research be undertaken with the aim of tracking the extent of the ancient main and minor roads in and around Cyrene and in the Cyrenaica region.

<sup>24</sup> GOODCHILD 1950.



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